

GRAMMAR CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING: RESEARCH, THEORY, AND APPLICATION

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Abstract

This article reviews a number of studies that proved the efficacy of consciousness-raising (C-R), showing at the same time the inherent flaws that these studies suffer. It then proceeds to discuss the theoretical assumptions underpinning C-R, the application and the intended outcomes of C-R. In doing this, teachers can obtain a comprehensive picture of C-R, and in particular understand its typical characteristics that differentiate it from the traditional teaching method such as the Grammar Translation. Implications from C-R studies for language teaching are also discussed.

Keywords: consciousness-raising, the Grammar Translation.

INTRODUCTION

It is not unreasonable to argue that grammar instruction still has a place at the heart of contemporary language pedagogy. Despite doubts cast over its credentials in instilling grammatical competence to students, a considerable body of research in Second Language Acquisition (SLA) has disclosed positive effects of grammar instruction on L2 acquisition (see Ellis, 1990 for a review of formal instruction research).

What is more, with the growing interest in second language acquisition research and with the insights drawn from it, grammar instruction has received considerable attention from applied linguists and become the focus of current research. This clearly indicates that grammar teaching, though bearing various labels, has not been completely abandoned and therefore does not seem to have lost its credibility in contemporary language pedagogy.

Grammar consciousness-raising is a case in point. It should be noted that though bearing resemblance the name “grammar”, *grammar consciousness-raising* should not be equated with *grammar teaching* as is commonly conceived in the grammar translation orthodoxy. The former is seen as a *means* to attainment of grammatical competence, whereas the

latter is viewed an *end* in itself. Despite this difference, C-R, as a cognitive approach to grammar instruction, could be said to partly represent a real comeback to traditional grammar teaching. The role of this type of approach to contemporary grammar teaching has been claimed to be “compatible with current thinking about how learners acquire L2 grammar (Ellis, 2002, p. 173), and viable approach to teach certain areas of grammar (Yip, 1994, p.123). It would be premature, however, to take for granted and simply assume the viability and compatibility of C-R in relation to L2 grammar acquisition. It is also equally premature to dismiss the speculation on the beneficial effects of C-R as “we lack research for ruling it out of court (Rutherford and Sherwood-Smith, 1981). The extent to which C-R is compatible with L2 grammar acquisition and viable in teaching certain areas of grammar is subject to empirical scrutiny.

In this article, I shall review some current research, the findings of which espouse the use of C-R approach in classrooms, and then continue to examine inherent limitations of the existing research. Following this is the discussion on the theoretical assumptions underlying C-R, classroom practical application of C-R as well as C-R’s intended outcome. Finally, I conclude by discussing the pedagogical implications of C-R.

RESEARCH ON CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING

A number of studies have been undertaken to investigate the efficacy of grammar consciousness-raising. Fotos and Ellis (1991) compared the effects of direct consciousness-raising by means of grammar explanation and of indirect consciousness-raising by means of a C-R task on Japanese learner’s ability to judge the grammaticality of sentences involving dative alteration. They found that both methods of consciousness-raising resulted in significant gains in understanding the target structure. Shen (1992) compared direct and indirect consciousness-raising in a six-week beginner’s French course for Japanese, finding that students in the two groups did equally well in a written post-test of the structure taught. Mohamed (2001), in Ellis (2003), found that indirect consciousness-raising was more effective than direct consciousness-raising when applied to high intermediate ESL learners from mixed L1 background but not to low intermediate learners, suggesting that the proficiency of learners can determine the effectiveness of C-R. Fotos (1993) conducted an experimental research to investigate the amount of learner noticing produced by two types of grammar consciousness-raising treatments: teacher-fronted grammar lessons and interactive, grammar problem-solving tasks. Involving 160 Japanese college students of English, Fotos designed her research by dividing the subjects into three different treatment groups, which were taught indirect object

placement, adverb placement, and relative clause usage in communicative input. The findings revealed that the two types of grammar consciousness-raising are effective in promoting significant level of noticing the target language structures in subsequent communicative input.

Another study investigating the effectiveness of consciousness-raising was carried out by Yip (1994). In an attempt to probe the benefit of C-R, Yip conducted a study on English *ergative*—verbs, which she observed, posed a logical problem of acquisition that cannot be resolved by positive evidence. Using a judgment task which contains such ergative verbs as *shatter*, *break*, *melt*, and *happen*, Yip found that many of her students, even the advanced students, rejected good ergatives as acceptable constructions such as *The mirror shattered during the last earthquake* and *My car has broken down*, and they judge these constructions to be ungrammatical. Alternatively, the students corrected the constructions using their own version, and thus becoming *The mirror was shattered during the last earthquake* and *My car has been / was broken down*. What is interesting in Yip's study is that his students accepted the incorrect ergative construction *What was happened here?* as an acceptable construction in English, and as such, judged it as grammatical. However, after undergoing C-R session class, her students showed dramatic improvement in that they were sensitive to the misapprehensions about the ergative construction in English. Based on this finding, Yip concludes that C-R can be effective, at least in the short term, in directing learner's attention to the ill-formedness of the grammatical features of the target language.

As for the C-R tasks (which can be deductive and inductive), Mohamed (2004) examines learners' perspectives of the effectiveness of such tasks. The findings indicate that learners have no strong preference for a particular type of task over the other. They view the tasks to be useful in assisting them to learn new knowledge about language. The finding suggests that C-R tasks (both deductive and inductive) are effective learning tool and can therefore be used to raise learners' awareness of linguistic forms.

Finally, Sugiharto (2006) investigated Indonesian students' ability in understanding the simple present tense rules, which often pose a problem for the students. Using a grammatical judgment test, Sugiharto compared the results from students' pre-and post-test, and found that students performance significantly better on the post-test. This study indicated that C-R is effective in helping students develop their explicit knowledge of the simple present tense.

LIMITATIONS OF THE EXISTING RESEARCH

Although available research of C-R has been conducted, bearing testimony to its pedagogical benefits, problems remain. One of the biggest problems concerns the generalizability of the findings. As all studies reviewed above focused on certain specific target structures with small sample of subjects, the findings are not necessarily conclusive and any attempts of generalizing them are not warranted. Thus, a C-R task which has been proven effective in facilitating the acquisition of one linguistic feature may not necessarily be effective when applied to other linguistic features. The problem is that different linguistic features have different degree of linguistic complexity and different frequency of occurrence in communication. The target rules that are less complex and have frequent occurrence in communication tend to be easier to learn and internalized, and grammar instruction is more likely to have an immediate effect; the target rules that are more complex and have less frequent occurrence in communication tend to pose learning difficulty, and grammar instruction seems to have a delay effect.

Another problem deals with the effects of the instruction *per se*, which can be temporary or permanent. Despite research findings espousing the benefits of C-R approach, no studies can give assurance of the long-lasting effects of the instruction. In fact, there are a number of studies that demonstrate that the effects of grammar instruction may not last and wear off after time (see, for instance, Ellis, 1997). It is possible that the instruction appears to have worked initially, but the effects are short-lived. If this were to be the case, then the utility of grammar instruction would be severely limited.

Furthermore, it remains unclear whether the positive effects of formal instruction were the result of the instruction itself or of other variables such as language aptitude, motivation, the amount of previous language exposure the learners have, and the complexity of the linguistic features being learned. Apart from the instruction itself, all of these factors should be taken into account as it has the potential to affect the acquisition of certain grammatical features. Finally, as Ellis (1985) argues, the extent to which formal instruction is supposed to aid Second Language Acquisition (SLA) remains unclear.

As it is still uncertain whether the beneficial effects were indeed the result of the formal instruction itself or of other potential factors, it would be safe to claim that formal instruction provides, as Ellis (1990) calls, weak evidence.

CONSCIOUSNESS-RAISING: THEORETICAL ASSUMPTIONS, PRACTICAL APPLICATION AND INTENDED OUTCOME

Central to understanding C-R are the theoretical assumptions on which it is based, its practical application in classroom context, and its intended outcome.

Theoretical Assumptions Two principal assumptions on which a general conception of C-R operates are worth discussing here. One of the principal assumptions upon which the C-R practices is founded is that formal instruction is deemed important and even desirable as it can help facilitate the acquisition of grammatical knowledge—that is declarative or explicit knowledge. Proponent of C-R might argue that the exposure to comprehensible input is necessary, but not sufficient to bring about successful acquisition (Yip, 1994). In this case, C-R is often claimed to hold a ‘middle-ground or weak-interface position’ (see Ellis, 1994) between two extreme approaches to teaching L2 grammar: those who adopt a non-interface position (Krashen, 1981; Hulstijn, 2002; Zobl, 1995) and those who argue for interface position (Sharwood-Smith, 1981). It is also claimed that C-R is something of a compromise between the grammar-translation and communicative language teaching (Yip, 1994, p. 124).

Another principal that underlies C-R is that it is more effective to develop awareness of specific grammatical structures at the level of understanding than to spontaneously require the learner to produce them in communication. As Ellis (2002) put it: “The aim of this kind of grammar teaching (C-R) is not to enable the learner to perform a structure correctly but simply to help him/her to ‘know about it’ (p.169). In a similar vein, Rutherford & Sharwood-Smith (1985, p. 280) states “C-R is considered as a potential facilitator for the acquisition of linguistic competence and has nothing directly to do with the use of that competence for the achievement of specific communicative objectives, or with the achievement of fluency”. The ‘delayed production of language’ is in fact one of the striking features that distinguishes C-R from the grammar translation.

Practical Application In its practical application C-R activities can be carried out either using deductive or inductive approach. In the former, the learner is provided with explicit explanations of grammatical structure. In the latter, the learner is provided with language data and is then asked to discover or construct the grammar rule for themselves. In an attempt to distinguish C-R tasks from other form-focused tasks, Ellis (2002, p. 168) lists the main characteristics of the former as the following:

1. There is an attempt to isolate a specific linguistic feature for focused attention.
2. The learners are provided with data which illustrate the targeted feature and they may also be supplied with an explicit rule describing or explaining the feature.
3. The learners are expected to utilize intellectual effort to understand the targeted feature.
4. Misunderstanding or incomplete understanding of the grammatical structure by the learners leads to clarification in the form of further data and description or explanation.
5. Learners may be required (though not obligatory) to articulate the rule describing the grammatical structure.

A C-R task is defined by Ellis (1997) as “a pedagogic activity where the learners are provided with L2 data in some form and required to perform some operation on or with it, the purpose of which is to arrive at an explicit understanding of some linguistic property or properties of the target language (p. 160). According to Ellis (2003), C-R should consist of (1) data containing exemplars of the targeted feature and (2) instructions requiring the learners to operate on the data in some way. Data options can include authentic vs. contrived, oral vs. written and gap vs. non-gap, while operation types can include identification (underlining the target structure in the data), judgment (responding to the correctness or appropriateness of the data), and sorting (classifying the data by sorting it into defined categories) (Ellis, 1997).

It is imperative to reiterate here that once the C-R task has been applied to students, teachers are not expected to demand students’ mastery or accurate production of the target structures immediately upon instruction. Unlike other form-focused activities that encourage immediate language production, C-R deemphasizes learner production, and is not intended to lead to correct use of the targeted feature in spontaneous language use directly following task performance (Ellis, 1997).

Intended outcome In general, the intended outcome of C-R approach is that students have an *awareness* of the existence of linguistic features in the target language. The notion of *awareness* has been operationalized by Ellis (2002) as (1) being able to consciously “notice” formal properties of the language in the input, and (2) being able to form an explicit representation of a target form, that is the ability to develop explicit knowledge. Awareness of the targeted structure can be triggered by drawing the students’ attention to the targeted linguistic features. There are two ways of doing this, the first being directing the learner to the well-formedness of

the target structures (positive evidence), and the second being providing them with the deviant target structures (negative evidence).

IMPLICATIONS

Although not without problems, research has provided compelling evidence that C-R, as one form of formal instruction, does have pedagogical benefits in that it can help “raise the learners’ consciousness about the existence of linguistic features which she would otherwise ignore” (Ellis, 1990, p. 169). It has also been claimed that C-R can help facilitate acquisition, converting the explicit knowledge the learners develop into implicit knowledge. That is to say that there is a possibility for the explicit knowledge to become fully automated as part of implicit knowledge, provided that sufficient exposure to instruction was given. This claim, however, is not uncontroversial and therefore needs to be taken with great circumspection.

The implications from C-R studies for teaching instruction are clear. In a situation where a learner is initially unable to process certain linguistic forms, C-R tasks can be used as a powerful tool to help him develop an awareness of that form. For instance, a learner that might be unaware that the third person singular requires *-s* can be made aware by exposing him to C-R tasks. As for the grammatical features that often pose a learnability problem in SLA (see, for instance, Yip, 1994), C-R tasks can be used as a means to trigger students’ noticing, a condition necessary for the acquisition of those features to take place. In fact, noticing, as Ellis (1997) argues, is one of the fundamental operations for the input to become implicit knowledge.

However, as C-R defers students’ language production, its effects may not be felt immediately. As has been mentioned previously, C-R aims at helping students to know about linguistic features, that is, it intends to help the students develop the understanding of linguistic features (i.e., to develop explicit knowledge) rather than to use it spontaneously. This being so, teachers cannot expect much from the students’ immediate correct use of language. In fact, it is not the direct intention of C-R to produce students with an immediate grammatical proficiency. At this juncture, it is necessary to reiterate here that C-R serves as a means, not an end in itself; that is, it functions as a facilitator of explicit knowledge, which in the long term can contribute to the development of implicit knowledge, the knowledge that becomes the ultimate goal in language pedagogy.

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